

JFK rememb

Reporter recalls day's events in vivid

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Twenty-five years ago at the precise hour President John F. Kennedy's motorcade headed toward the Texas Book Depository, a Viet Cong force which had crept inside a Special Forces compound 18 miles west of Saigon, opened fire with automatic weapons, killing four Americans and 37 South Vietnamese troops.

But Saigon itself slept. It was 2:30 on the morning of Saturday, Nov. 23, Saigon time, when Lee Harvey Oswald's bullet slammed into the President of the United States.

The shots at the Hiep Hoa camp were not the ones heard 'round the world that day. The shots in Dallas, Tex. were.

The day before I had been named editor of the joint command armed forces newspaper for Southeast Asia, *The Observer*, published by the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).

The paper was distributed to 23,000 troops over some 500 miles from the DMZ in the north to the Gulf of Thailand in the South and from the South China Sea in the East to the borders of Cambodia and Laos to the west.

I was shaving and flipped on the radio to Armed Forces Radio, Saigon. Saturday mornings featured a country and western program hosted by a volunteer disk jockey.

A Hank Williams record ended, and this amateur radio announcer said quite matter-of-factly in his hillbilly twang, "Well folks, I see here by the wire that somebody's shot the old president down in Dallas, Tex."

I couldn't believe what he said. I rushed to the phone and called the station, identifying myself. "What the hell are you trying to do?" I shouted into the phone. "That stuff about the president isn't funny. Quit clowning

around."

He informed me that he wasn't "clowning around," and that he had turned on the AP wire and that's what it reported. On Saturdays, the newsmen didn't show up at the station until noon or so, and our disc jockey had turned on the machine by himself and read the bulletins. I told him to close his mike until somebody got there and play funeral music, which I had to explain.

I didn't bother calling the office. I knew the crew would be on their way. I dressed in civvies, hung a .45 in a shoulder holster, jumped into my Morris Minor 100 and broke every traffic law racing through the traffic already jamming the streets.

The MAAG compound on Tan Hung Dao street was actually just over the border in Cholon, the Chinese city abutting Saigon. The boss, MAAG information officer Maj. Bill Koch was already there, as was the officer in charge of the paper, Capt. Bill Smith, and still editor SFC Tony Burmudez.

At first, nobody spoke, standing around with looks of total shock. Associated Press wire copy was strewn everywhere.

I picked up one printed in all caps, a bulletin:

BULLETIN

DALLAS, NOV. 22 (AP) — PRESIDENT KENNEDY WAS SHOT TODAY JUST AS HIS MOTORCADE LEFT DOWNTOWN DALLAS. MRS. KENNEDY JUMPED UP AND GRABBED MR. KENNEDY. SHE CRIED, "OH NO!" THE MOTORCADE SPED ON.

Then later, another flash.

BULLETIN

DALLAS, NOV. 22 (AP) — TWO PRIESTS STEPPED OUT OF PARKLAND HOSPITAL'S EMERGENCY WARD TODAY AND SAID PRESIDENT KENNEDY DIED OF HIS BULLET WOUNDS.

At 1:33 p.m., a heavy-hearted presi-

dential spokesman, Malcolm Lilduff read to waiting newsmen a statement that the president had died at approximately 1 p.m.

"We've got to get this to the troops before Ho Chi Minh and Radio Hanoi cranks up," Koch said. Hanoi Hanna, with an excellent selection of the latest American records and an equally sleazy propaganda line would be exploiting the story of the assassination.

It was just three weeks after the bloody Saigon coup by the generals and the assassination of Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother.

We decided we'd have to get some kind of extra edition out as soon as possible.

Koch was in touch with Lee Baker, an Air Force colonel who was the chief military spokesman in the country for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, (MACV). They worked out a condolence statement from the theater commander, Gen. Paul Harkins which we could use in the special edition.

The suspicion was that maybe the military had been temporarily held in the dark by the embassy since there was a coldness between Harkins and the ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge.

We needed a picture of the dead president, which was easy. There was a framed portrait above the major's desk. We decided we could only get out a single page paper, with the entire front just the paper's nameplate, the headline "PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED," his photo in a thick black box, and underneath his name and the years he lived, 1917-1963.

While I was writing the main copy from wire service reports Dick Jones was sent to find a photo of President Johnson for the back page. Capt. Smith had contacted the printing plant to gear up for the extra edition.

The printing facilities were primitive at best. The building was not air con-

ered

detail

ditioned and was sweltering. Type had to be hand set, with single letters plucked from type boxes with tweezers to form a word.

We stripped to our undershorts to work up the paper. Looking back, we must have appeared ridiculous, standing there in nothing but boxer shorts and .45's in shoulder holsters on our bare chests.

Back at the office, the officers were arranging to circulate our "extra" the minute we got it off the old flat-bed press.

Koch and Smith were lining up helicopters, fixed wing transports, river patrol boats, trucks and armored vehicles, using the country-wide "tiger" line which was sort of a Vietnam 800 line.

Finally, Dick Jones came dashing into the plant with an envelope. He had dug up a picture of Lyndon Johnson.

By now we had filled the page with the Harkins message, an AP story out of Boston on funeral arrangements, a biography of JFK, my story of the assassination, and a small box saying the TV networks back home had cancelled all entertainment programs and commercials.

By 11 a.m., two and a half hours later, the extra edition was completed and loaded. We ran about 30,000 copies, and took several hundred and handed them out on the streets, many to Vietnamese nationals eager for news of the tragedy.

By noon, we were sitting in the Air France-owned Caravelle Hotel bar on the seventh floor, with all the war correspondents, including Malcolm Brown of the AP, David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan of the New York Times, and the Pulitzer Prize winning AP photographer Horst Fass.

It was then it hit.
Hard.

It wasn't a nightmare. It was real.

